



THE WELL INSTITUTE

CHURCH HISTORY

Lesson 1 (Judaism, The Church, Acts)

Lesson 1

The Church Commences to about AD 177

The **Church** is the universal, century spanning, “body of Christ” comprised of all believers of all ages between Pentecost of Acts 2:1 and the Rapture yet to come.

1 Corinthians 12:27

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

Ephesians 4:12

¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

- When we speak, then, of church history, we are discussing the historical events and decisions that surround the people of Christ, those who are true believers or members of His church. We cannot judge if all members of this groups as defined by history were truly saved, but all of the events form the historical foundation of the church as it exists today.

For example, the Crusades were a series of events championed by the Church leaders of the day, but hindsight demonstrates the Crusades had little or nothing to do with the gospel of grace. Great cathedrals have been built with church funds adored by masterpieces of art, yet, where is the gospel of grace? Was God or money the force behind their creation? Again, we do not know the answer to this question, but the artwork exists for our pleasure, use and enjoyment. The chart below demonstrates one possible method of breaking down the centuries into manageable units of time for studying church history.

Periods of Church History

- Ancient Apostolic 30-100
- Ante-Nicene (before the great Council of Nicea) 100-313
- Nicene 313-590
- Medieval 590-1517
- Age of Reformation 1517-1648
- Age of Reason and Revival 1648-1789
- Age of Progress 1789-1914
- Age of Ideologies and Secularism, Post-Christian world 1914-Present

What we are about to study, then, involves the history of the church of Jesus Christ as it actually existed throughout the past twenty centuries. You will not agree with all of the theology expressed during this period nor will you approve of all the people involved. However, a clear understanding of these events will help you to understand how our doctrine developed, why we have denominations, why the Roman Catholic Church is both a cult and a major influence of church history, and many more similar questions.

So come along and join us on this exciting trip . . .

Judaism

Christianity was not born in a historical vacuum. Jesus was born Jewish and naturally the greatest influence on the Early Church was Judaism. We'll see in a moment, when we look at the opening chapters of Acts, how long it took for Jesus' message to break out of the Jewish mold.

The first Christians were Jews, different only in the belief that in Jesus, the Messiah had come. They took it for granted that his coming was the fulfilment of past revelation of God- Hebrews 1:1-2. In the early days of Acts, Christians established themselves as an active 'sect' among their fellow Jews, 'spending much time together in the temple' (Acts 2:46). Early Christianity was modelled on traditional Judaism - e.g. patterns of worship, belief in God's election, reverence for Scripture, social distinctives, stable family life, works of charity, etc. Initially there was no aspect of Judaism which they gave up, they just added features noted in Acts 2:41-46. All the time, however, the demands of Jesus' message were breaking up the Jewish mold in which the primitive Church had been set - there was no Jewish counterpart of the Eucharist, the significance of Christian baptism, meeting on Sunday not Saturday, etc.

Importance of synagogues

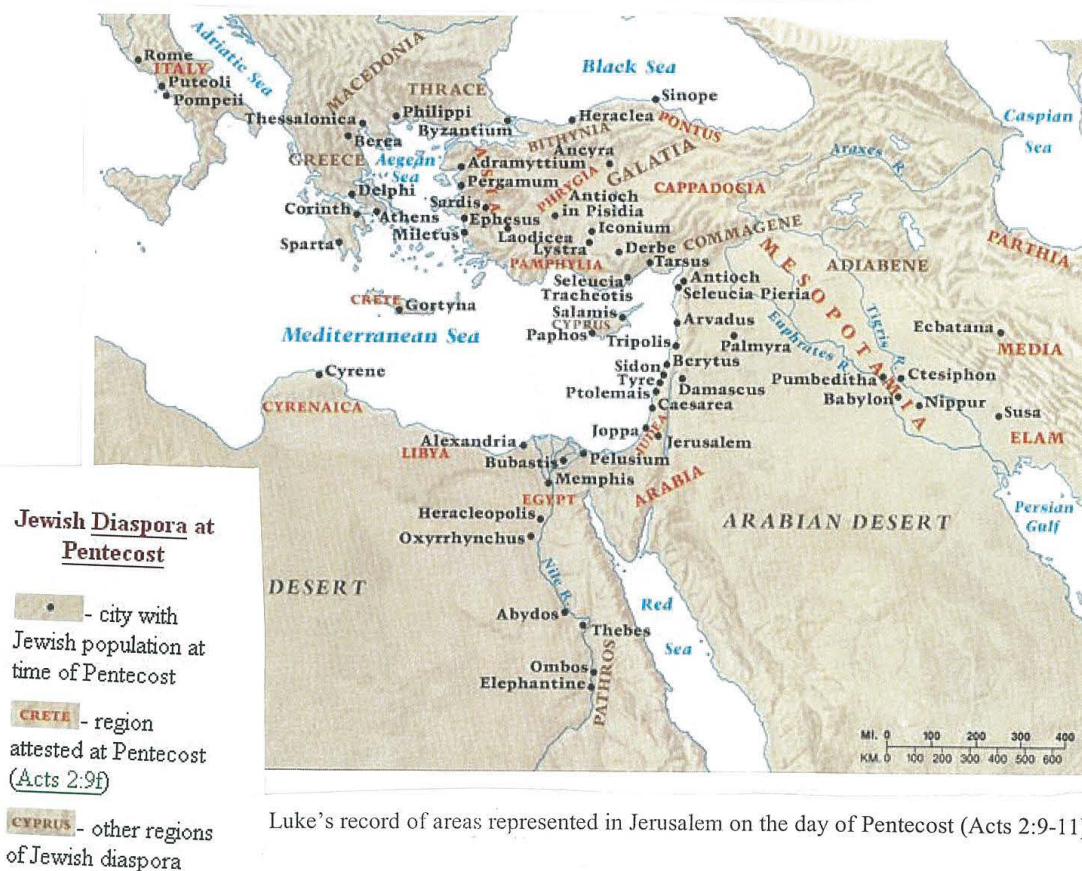
Synagogues were places for prayer and worship but primarily for instruction, to teach the Law of Moses. Acts narrates how early missionaries went first to Jews in the synagogue, if there was one, to proclaim that in Jesus, Messiah/Christ had come. (Greek 'Christ' = Hebrew 'Messiah'). Synagogues were natural starting-points for them, not only to preach to fellow Jews but to Gentiles who attended - many devout Gentiles admired Jewish morality and social work and attended the local synagogue, without becoming Jews - they were known as 'God-fearers'. Because they had heard the Old Testament read, Saturday after Saturday for years, they were ready listeners when Christian missionaries interpreted the Old Testament as a Christian book, which spoke of Christ, as the Lord himself had done, and when they preached that Jesus was the Messiah.

1. Relations between Rome and Judea were from moderate to good from about 161 BC to the first century. For example, during Herod Antipater's reign (37 BC-AD 4), Jews were "exempt from military service, and did not have to take part in any pagan rituals, not even emperor-worship."
2. As we move further into the 1st century AD, Rome considered Christianity a sect of Judaism and because of that, the church received the same perks as the Jews. Christianity, like Judaism, was given status as a legal religion (a *religio licita*), which protected the Christian church from state-sanctioned, official persecution.

(b) The Dispersion

Millions of Jews lived permanently outside Palestine, known as Jews of the Dispersion (*diaspora*). Jewish presence throughout the Empire was vast, eight or nine percent of the total, with significant presence in Rome, Italy, Greece, Egypt (one million) and Islands. Wherever ten men were found, a synagogue could be formed, so there was a network of synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world. As mentioned, when the early Christian missionaries went to a new community, their first approach was usually to the local synagogue, explaining that in Jesus, the Messiah had come. Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, usually started there.

Until the Temple was destroyed in 70, thousands came every year to one of the festivals in Jerusalem. Read Acts 2:9-11 with one eye on the map below and follow Luke's description of the extent of the *diaspora* who had come to be present at Pentecost – it illustrates the widespread places where there were synagogues. On the map, the areas in upper-case red are the ones mentioned in Acts 2. Luke begins his list in the east with Parthia, Media, Elam, and Mesopotamia, he then mentions Judea, then his list goes north to Cappadocia and Pontus, then west to the province of Asia, then inland to Phrygia and Pamphylia. From there he crosses to Egypt and its neighbour, Cyrene, then to Rome and finally he mentions Crete and Arabia. Many pilgrims heard the apostles preach at Pentecost and were astounded to hear their own languages, but we have no record as to whether these hearers formed churches when they got home.



Luke's record of areas represented in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9-11)

The Dispersion

Jewish Diaspora at Pentecost

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The Apostles

The enemies of their Master insulted all of the apostles. They were called to seal their doctrines with their blood and nobly did they bear the trial. Tradition says that:

- Matthew suffered martyrdom by being slain with a sword at a distant city of Ethiopia.
- Mark expired at Alexandria, after being cruelly dragged through the streets of that city.
- Luke was hanged upon an olive tree in the classic land of Greece.
- John was put in a caldron of boiling oil, but escaped death in a miraculous manner, and was afterward banished to Patmos.
- Peter was crucified at Rome with his head downward.
- James, the Greater, was beheaded at Jerusalem,
- James, the Less, was thrown from a lofty pinnacle of the temple, and then beaten to death with a fuller's club.
- Bartholomew was flayed alive.
- Andrew was bound to a cross, whence he preached to his persecutors until he died.
- Thomas was run through the body with a lance at Coromandel in the East Indies.
- Jude was shot to death with arrows.
- Matthias was first stoned and then beheaded.
- Barnabas of the Gentiles was stoned to death at Salonica.
- Paul, after various tortures and persecutions, was beheaded at Rome by the Emperor Nero.

- The Apostles were not the only ones to move about the world with the Gospel message.

Acts 8:1

¹ Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Those “scattered” were the new believers. As they moved across the country-side, they took the Gospel message with them, delivering it to their neighbors and others they encountered along the way. One example of this spreading of the Gospel is found in the book of Acts with the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:5; 26ff). While it cannot be stated with certainty, it is likely that visitors to Jerusalem who were converted at Pentecost started the church at Rome. They took the Gospel message back home with them.

The pattern of the Apostles may be seen in the missionary journeys of Paul outlined in the book of Acts. While many of the Apostles appear to have settled and ministered in one location, others traveled from town-to-town, as did Paul, spreading the Gospel message. Indeed, it is possible that Paul undertook one final journey following the end of the Book of Acts.

Nothing is actually known about Paul’s life after Acts 28 except for a few stray traditions that have survived and the wishes he expressed in his letters. It is reasonably clear that one cannot fit the events of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus into the events recorded in Acts.

Therefore, it appears Paul was released from prison after Acts 28, only to be later arrested. 1 Timothy and Titus were written during this period of release and 2 Timothy written after the apostle’s second arrest. A comparison of Titus 3:12 and 2 Timothy 4:21 requires that at least two winters are involved in the time frame covered by the Pastoral Epistles. Assuming that Paul more or less kept to the itinerary laid forth in his letters, the 4th missionary journey would be approximately like this:

- Timothy is immediately sent to Philippi with news of Paul’s release (Phil 2:19-23)
- He went to Crete, leaving Titus behind (Titus 1:5)
- From there, he went to Ephesus
- Then to Colossae to see Philemon (Philemon 22)
- He then probably returns to Ephesus
- Timothy joins him either at Ephesus or Colosse and Paul asks Timothy to stay in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3, 4)
- Then to Macedonia (1 Tim 1:3)
- This may have included Philippi (Phil 2:24), Nicopolis (Titus 3:12)
- The winter having passed, if Paul went to Spain as he wished (Rom 15:24, 28) it would have been in the spring. Clement of Rome, writing around 100, talks of Paul “come to the extreme limit of the west.” This could mean Spain. Some commentators view this as meaning Britain. There is a tradition that says Titus accompanied Paul on this journey, wherever he went.
- He would then revisit Timothy in Ephesus (1 Tim 3:14, 15).
- He would then have passed through the seaport of Miletus where he had to leave an ill Trophimus behind (2 Tim 4:20)
- Next to Troas where he stayed with Carpus and left his cloak and some books behind (2 Tim 4:13).
- From there to Corinth where Erastus left the party (2 Tim 4:20; cf Rom 16:23).
- And on to Rome from where he sits in prison and writes 2 Timothy.

- His arrest could have occurred anywhere along this route commencing perhaps at Miletus, although Troas is a better suggestion, explaining why the clothing and books were left with Carpus.
- A comparison of Acts and 2 Timothy shows the second imprisonment was not as comfortable as the first. Paul was restricted to a cell in chains (2 Timothy 1:16; 2:9) and Onesiphorus had to search him out with great difficulty (2 Timothy 1:17)

In addition, we may note in the Acts the pattern of dispute resolution used by the Church during the first several centuries of its existence. Acts 15 records the events of the Jerusalem Council, a meeting of church leaders to resolve the question of whether or not a new believer needed to be circumcised. Several times during the 400 years, the church would meet to hold councils to resolve major theological issues.

With the exception of the Apostle John, **the first generation of church leaders had died by A.D. 70**. The second generation includes Timothy, Titus and many others named in the epistles. These are the disciples or students of the Apostles. All of the Apostles would have had their Timothy's, even if we do not know their names. Those who preached in the First, Second, Third, and, perhaps, Fourth centuries earned the name "Church Fathers." To a great extent, these are the men who formed the "systematic doctrine" of the church as they fought for the Apostle's doctrines and clarified meanings of terms found in the Scriptures.

CHURCH PROBLEMS 100-313

EXTERNAL

INTERNAL

ROMAN STATE

PAGAN INTELLECTUALS

RESPONSE OF CHURCH

MARTYRS
APOLOGISTS
Justin Martyr (E)
Tertullian (W)

LUCIAN
De Peregrinus

CELSUS
True Discourse
Answered by Origen in
Against Celus

ANSWERED BY

CONSTITUTION (POLITY)

1. Apostolic succession—
Clement of Rome
2. Episcopacy
 - a. Monepiscopate—
Ignatius
 - b. Primacy of Peter—
Cyprian

CREEDS
Rules of Faith—
Tertullian, Irenaeus

CANON OF SCRIPTURE

CONTROVERSY OR POLEMIC

Irenaeus vs. Gnostics
Tertullian vs. Monarchians

The (Post-Apostolic) Church Fathers

In general, the references to “church fathers” are broken down based upon time periods and their method of protecting or defending the Gospel. The first group is the Apostolic or **Post-Apostolic Fathers** (c.95-150, Clement, Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp). The second group is the **Apologists** (c.140-200, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Tertulian), followed by the **Polemicists** (c. 180-225, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertulian, Cyprian), with the fourth group being the Scientific Theologians (c. 225-400, Augustine, Origen, Cyril, Athanasius, Jerome, Ambrose, Theodore, John Chrysostom). The Fathers are also referred to relative to their time relationship to the Nicene Council (A.D. 325), resulting in the Apostolic Fathers (second century), the Ante-Nicene Fathers (second, third centuries), the Nicene Fathers (fourth century), and the Post-Nicene Fathers (fifth century).

We know from Scriptures that the persecution of Acts 8 is Jewish in nature. Likewise, it is Herod who undertakes the persecution in Acts 12 that results in the death of the Apostle James, brother of John. Both of these persecutions send Christians out of Jerusalem.

It also appears that by A.D. 45, there were Christians along the Mediterranean coast in places like Antioch, but aside from Jerusalem the only other pocket of Christians appears to be in Rome. Paul’s missionary journeys commence around A.D. 50. His letter to the Galatians was written around A.D. 49. At the same time that Paul moves Christianity along the Mediterranean coast into Asia Minor (Turkey) on across toward Greece and Rome, persecutions in Rome would move Christians outward in all directions from that city.

In the summer of A.D. 64 Rome burns. While many stories exist about this event, the citizens of Rome blamed Nero, who, in turn, blames the Christians and persecutes them. This is the first clear indication within the Roman Empire that Christianity is a separate religion from Judaism. Many Christians die, but many more flee the city. The Christians believed in only one God, while taking no note of social status. This belief excludes the emperor from being deity. This offended the Romans. As such, the emperors would view Christianity as an attack upon the existing social structure of Rome.

While Nero was busy attacking the Christians in Rome, the empire was also attacking the Jews in the Holy Lands, first through the office of the Roman ruler Florus (A.D. 64) and then through the offices of General Vespasian. Nero ordered the General to take full control of Galilee and Judea. At Nero’s death, Vespasian returned to Rome to become Emperor, but sent an army back to Jerusalem to stop all of the revolts the Romans “discovered.” The net result of this was the scattering of Jews and Christians alike. This also had a chilling effect upon relationships between the Jews and the Christians, with the Jews once again directly persecuting the Christians.

With Vespasian’s son, Domitian, becoming emperor around A.D. 81, the empire once again persecuted the Christians. Domitian claimed the title “Lord and God,” an obvious affront to the Christians. It should be noted that Domitian also persecuted the Jews. This persecution continued under Trajan.

The church fathers of the time took the approach of attempting to “prove” to the Romans that Christianity was not a threat to the empire. These scholars were called “apologists” from the Greek word *apologia*, meaning a formal justification or reply, that is, a reasoned argument. They did not attempt to convert the Romans, merely prove to them the Christians were not criminals and should not be persecuted. The best known of this group was Justin, who was beheaded in A.D. 165, earning him the name of Justin Martyr.

Ironically, while the apologists may have helped shape later doctrinal statements of the church, it was the attitudes of the Christians towards morals, the social standing of people (or, rather, the ignoring thereof), and the outward personal relationship with a caring God that won individual Romans over to Christ. Many Romans became disillusioned with the moral / social fabric of Roman and converted to Christianity during this period.

First Century Events

- The words and sayings of Jesus are collected and preserved. New Testament writings are completed.
- A new generation of leaders succeeds the apostles. Nevertheless, expectation still runs high that the Lord may return at any time. The end must be close.
- The Gospel taken through a great portion of the known world of the Roman empire and even to regions beyond.
- New churches at first usually begin in Jewish synagogues around the empire and Christianity is seen at first as a part of Judaism.
- The Church faces a major crisis in understanding itself as a universal faith and how it is to relate to its Jewish roots.
- Christianity begins to emerge from its Jewish womb. A key transition takes place at the time of Jewish Revolt against Roman authority. In 70 AD Christians do not take part in the revolt and relocate to Pella in Jordan.
- The Jews at Jamnia in 90 AD confirm the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. The same books are recognized as authoritative by Christians.
- Persecutions test the church. Jewish historian Josephus seems to express surprise that they are still in existence in his Antiquities in latter part of first century.
- Key persecutions include Nero at Rome who blames Christians for a devastating fire that ravages the city in 64 AD He uses Christians as human torches to illumine his gardens.
- Emperor Domitian demands to be worshiped as "Lord and God." During his reign the book of Revelation is written and believers cannot miss the reference when it proclaims Christ as the one worthy of our worship.

AD 100 (TWO GENERATIONS AFTER CHRIST)

- Percent Christian: 0.6%
- Breakdown: 70% nonwhite, 30% white
- Evangelization: 28.0% of world
- Scriptures: 6 languages
- Total martyrs since AD 33: 25,000 (1.2% of all Christians ever; rate 370 per year)

Second Century Events

- The Lord has not returned as soon as expected, so organization is needed to continue the ministry, resist persecution, oppose heretical teachings, and spread the word. Thus the office and role of the bishop becomes stronger.

- While persecution continues intermittently from without, heresies pose major dangers from within and must be answered. Heresies include:

GNOSTICISM -- A kind of New Age movement that claimed special knowledge. All matter (physical material i.e. the body) is bad, corrupt. All things spiritual (ephemeral) is good.

MARCIONISM -- An attempt to reduce the Scriptures--both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures -- to a few select books.

MONTANISM -- A charismatic movement that got carried away with new revelations, prophecies, and judgmental attitudes toward other Christians.

- Apologists, or explainers of the faith, emerge to combat heresy and answer the church's opponents. Key apologists include Irenaeus and Justin Martyr.

- The churches are not legal and have no public forum or church buildings. Local persecution can break out at any time. A profound public witness emerges as Christians are put to death because they will not deny the faith at any cost. Examples: Martyrdom of 84-year-old bishop Polycarp (AD 155) and a whole group mercilessly tortured at Lyons in AD 177.

- The strongest centers of the Church are Asia Minor and North Africa. Rome is also a center of prestige.

- The church continues its amazing spread reaching all classes, particularly the lower. Callistus--a former slave--actually becomes bishop of Rome and makes claims for special importance of the Roman bishop.

AD 200 (SIX GENERATIONS AFTER CHRIST)

- Percent Christian: 3.5%
- Breakdown: 68% nonwhite, 32% white
- Evangelization: 32% of world
- Scriptures: 7 languages
- Total martyrs since AD 33: 80,000 (0.5% of all Christians ever; rate 48 per year)

Source: David Barrett.

One Hundred Key Events in Church History Part 1: From Nero to the Battle of Tours

Details from the arch erected to honor Titus' triumph over the Jews

Year and event

64

Fire ravages Rome. Emperor Nero blames Christians and unleashes persecution.

70

Titus destroys Jerusalem and its temple. Separation deepens between Christianity and Judaism.

about 150

Justin Martyr writes his First Apology, advancing Christian efforts to address competing philosophies.

about 156

Polycarp, an eighty-six-year-old bishop, inspires Christians to stand firm under opposition.

177

Irenaeus becomes bishop of Lyons and combats developing heresies within the Church.

about 196

Colorful and cantankerous Tertullian begins writings that earn him the reputation of being the "Father of Latin Theology."

about 205

The gifted North African Origen begins writing. He headed a noted catechetical school in Alexandria.

251

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, publishes his influential work *Unity of the Church*. He was martyred in 258.



270

Antony gives away his possessions and begins life as a hermit, a key event in the development of Christian monasticism.

312

Constantine is converted after seeing a vision of the cross. He becomes a defender and advocate of the oppressed Christians.

325

The **Council of Nicea** addresses debates perplexing the Church and defines the doctrine of who Jesus really was.

367

Athanasius' Easter Letter recognizes the New Testament Canon, listing the same books we have now.

385

In Milan, Bishop Ambrose defies the Empress, helping establish the precedent of Church confrontation of the state when necessary to protect Christian teaching and oppose the state.

387

Augustine of Hippo is converted. His writings became bedrock for the Middle Ages. The Confessions and City of God are still read by many.

398

John Chrysostom, the "golden tongued" preacher is made bishop of Constantinople and leads from there amidst continuing controversies.

405

Jerome completes the Latin "Vulgate" version of the bible that becomes the standard for the next one thousand years.

432

Patrick goes as a missionary to Ireland--taken there as a teenager as a slave. He returns and leads multitudes of Irish people to the Christian faith.

451

The Council of Chalcedon confirms orthodox teaching that Jesus was truly God and truly man and existed in one person.

529

Benedict of Nursia establishes his monastic order. His "rule" becomes the most influential for centuries of monasticism in the West.

563

Columba goes as a missionary to Scotland. He establishes the legendary monastic mission center at Iona.

590

Gregory becomes Pope Gregory I, known as "the Great." His leadership significantly advances the development of the papacy and has enormous influence on Europe.

664

Synod of Whitby determines that the English church will come under the authority of Rome.

716

Boniface, the "Apostle of Germany," sets out as a missionary to bring the gospel to pagan lands.

731

The "Venerable" Bede completes his careful and influential Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation.

732

At the Battle of Tours, Charles Martel turns back the Muslim invasion of Europe.

